

97-84053-14

Harrison, Shelby Millard

The hap-hazard public
agencies for settling...

[New York]

[1912]

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Harrison, Shelby Millard, 1881-
... The hap-hazard public agencies for settling
industrial disputes; the argument for a federal
commission on industrial relations based on
experience [by] Shelby M. Harrison. New York,
Committee on industrial relations [1912].
[11] p. 20 cm. (Pocket pamphlet no. 7)

UNITED

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TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35mm

REDUCTION RATIO: 9:1

IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA (IIA) IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 3-26-97

INITIALS: MS

TRACKING # : 21816

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The Hap-hazard Public Agencies for Settling Industrial Disputes

*The Argument for a Federal Commission on Industrial
Relations Based on Experience*

SHELBY M. HARRISON

Published by the
Committee on Industrial Relations
Room 607 Kent Hall
Amsterdam Ave. and 116th St., New York

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The Hap-hazard Public Agencies for Settling Industrial Disputes

The Argument for a Federal Commission on Industrial
Relations Based on Experience

To exhibit the complete absence of any logical or consistent method for investigating the merits of industrial controversies, and even for formulating the issues in such a way as to afford the possibility of arriving at a settlement, we have only to review the incidents of any such controversies.

The Westmoreland Strike

Early in 1910, between 17,000 and 20,000 coal miners, working in the pits of Westmoreland county, Pennsylvania, laid down their tools and quit work. No clear statement of issues was made public at the beginning of the strike, and no mediating agency was on hand to act. Except for two communications from committees representing the strikers and labor leaders, both of which were ignored by the operators, no official communications, public or private, setting forth the causes of the strike passed, either way, between the operators and workers.

Six months after the strike began a Committee of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce addressed a letter to both operators and striking workers, stating that business men in the strike zone who had been greatly injured by the continuation of the strike had asked them to use their influence to bring about a settlement, and that they therefore asked both sides to place before "an impartial, unprejudiced committee the differences which are yours." The executive committee of the strikers replied favorably, but the large operators, who were looked upon as representing all the operators, replied in substance that they recognized no differences that might properly be sub-



jects of arbitration. The matter stopped there. No other offers of arbitration were made. About twelve months after the strike began a hearing was held before the Rules Committee of the House of Representatives to determine whether there should be a federal investigation, but the Committee decided against such an inquiry.

The strike continued for sixteen months and was finally won by the companies by bringing strike-breakers and new workers into the district, by employing deputy sheriffs to protect them, by making use of liberal police service from the Pennsylvania state constabulary, and by prolonging the fight until the financial drain upon the United Mine Workers' treasury, estimated to have been over a million dollars, became too great. Many times a million dollars were lost to the miners in wages and to the companies in extra expense, inactivity, and destroyed property; and yet the only way in which the state officially recognized the existence of the strike was in detaching the state constabulary to service in the strike zone.

The Ludlow Strike

In the early autumn of 1909 about 1,700 textile workers in Ludlow, Massachusetts, went on strike on account of a wage disagreement. From the beginning of the strike to its close members of the Massachusetts State Board of Conciliation and Arbitration were in touch with its developments. Three days after the whole body of workers went out, the secretary of the Board offered the services of the state with a view to conciliation. Both the company and the representatives of the workers declined the offer.

Later, at a general mass meeting a committee was appointed to represent the strikers in negotiations with the company. At least two conferences were held between the committee and of-

ficers of the company, but no settlement of differences could be reached.

Two months after the Board of Conciliation and Arbitration first offered its services, the public having become considerably interested in the meantime, the Board again made advances; and this time its services were accepted on both sides. The Board acted as the medium between the company and the strikers, since relations between the contending parties had become so strained that it was deemed best that they should not meet each other. A satisfactory settlement of the points at issue was arranged; and after several months of idleness, the strikers went back to their old places in the mills. The Massachusetts Board regarded the result as one of its greatest achievements in its twenty-four years of activity.

In this case and also in the Westmoreland strike, the workers were unorganized before the first trouble began.

The Paper Workers' Strike

In April, 1910, a strike began in the mills of the International Paper Company in New York and in some of the New England states. The employees were organized into unions; and the employers refused to meet and confer with their workmen in any way except as individuals. At the request of certain citizens of Corinth, New York, the Commissioner of Labor of New York state ordered the chief of the State Bureau of Arbitration to make an investigation of the strike. Previously, a preliminary inquiry had been made by a representative of the Department of Labor, and affidavits bearing on the points at issue were secured from a considerable number of men.

The Bureau of Arbitration began to hold public hearings and subpoena witnesses, but after two or three public hearings had been held, the company requested the employees to send to New York a

committee consisting of a man from each mill, for a conference with the management. The request was complied with and an agreement covering all important points at issue reached and signed.

Incidentally, as a side light perhaps upon the tact used in the Bureau's work, the Chief of the Bureau of Arbitration was asked by the company to give up his work with the state and become general manager of their labor force. He did so, and is today at work promoting harmonious relations between employer and employees.

Grand Rapids Furniture Makers

In the spring of 1911, following a movement toward the organization of the skilled workers, which had been going on for several months, about six thousand furniture workers in the shops and factories of Grand Rapids, Michigan, went on strike. A self-constituted committee of citizens of Grand Rapids made an inquiry, looking to the settlement of the differences. This consisted of a first statement from each side, the unions and the employers' organization, and a reply from each. The committee carried its investigation no further, and disbanded with a few recommendations, which were not acted upon. No arbitration or conciliation followed, and after about four months the strikers gave up the struggle in defeat.

The Bethlehem Strike

A strike began February, 1910, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as the result of the discharge of a fellow employee who had avoided Sunday work in the steel mills. The men were unorganized and chose this method of voicing their sentiments. Some local efforts were made toward conciliation, but they were not, properly speaking, attempts at arbitration. They were attempts, inspired by the merchants, who were losing trade through the

strike, to get the men to go back to work on any terms, rather than an effort to get to the bottom of the dispute and settle it upon some solid basis. The strike ran along until the latter part of May—about three months—when lack of funds forced the workers to resume their old places in the mills, with none of the points in dispute satisfactorily settled.

The Cloak Makers' Strike

In the summer of 1910 the cloakmakers in several hundred shops in New York City left their work because of a number of grievances, chief among them being the unwillingness of employers to maintain a "closed shop"; and they stayed away about two months. The New York State Bureau of Arbitration made several offers of its services, and twice tried to bring about a settlement. Both attempts failed. Two conferences were held between employers and workers through the influence of a Boston customer of the cloak manufacturers. Witnesses for both sides were called, and testimony to the extent of nearly seven hundred printed pages was taken. No supplementary investigation was made, however. An agreement finally grew out of the conferences, which among other things provided for a fixed scale of minimum wages, the establishment of an arbitration board, on which there should be one representative for the union, one for the manufacturers' association and one for the public, and the establishment of a joint board of sanitary control on which the public was also represented.

Chaos of Public Agencies

Here are six strikes, chosen almost at random, and yet exhibiting the utmost variety of haphazard plans of conciliation and the greatest variety of results. In one case the state policed the strike

district, a congressional committee made a preliminary examination, and a chamber of commerce in an adjacent district moved for arbitration; but the strike held on for sixteen months and no agreement was ever made with old employees.

In another case a state board of conciliation and arbitration offered its services immediately after the strike became serious. Its offers were rejected at that time, but two months later its services were again offered and accepted, with the result that a satisfactory settlement was reached.

In another strike a state bureau of arbitration began an investigation which led immediately to a conference between employers and workers and to a satisfactory agreement.

In still another strike, a self-constituted committee of citizens drew out a statement of grievances and a reply from each side, but conciliation stopped there; and after a number of months the struggle was called off without a settlement.

Another case shows no mediating agencies at all, and a resumption of work without any understanding regarding grievances.

In the last case cited, a state bureau of arbitration made several offers of its services, and failed in two attempts to bring about a settlement, the settlement which was later reached being the result of conferences between representatives of the employers and of the workers.

Thus we see no uniformity either in the organization, in powers, or in methods used by what public agencies we now have for dealing with these deep-rooted disputes; and the results of the conflicts are seen to be equally haphazard. A review of all the labor disturbances in the last decade would but emphasize the lack of uniformity and consistency that is seen in the six strikes

cited. It would be seen that some state boards, for instance, may only make investigations into the issues involved in the strike; that some may publish their findings and that others may not; that some may initiate investigations while others must wait to be called into the crisis; that some receive sufficient appropriations from public funds to keep a secretary, at least, on duty all the time, while others have no funds and have practically no continuous existence; that most of them may recommend settlement measures, but that none have power to enforce them; and that many states have no such boards at all.

Neither have private agencies, which usually take the form of an investigating or a conciliatory committee, established a uniform or workable procedure. They add only a new element in the great variety that the agencies have already assumed.

Expensive Strife and Expensive Peace

The expensiveness of industrial conflicts, whether strikes or lockouts, will be admitted without argument. Ten thousand, one hundred thousand, or a million men idle because of labor difficulties, means more than ten thousand, one hundred thousand, or one million dollars in loss of wages for every day away from work. Industrial strife means loss to employers, by enforced idleness of mill or mine, through capital unemployed, through the necessity of guarding property, and the demoralized organization of work. The expense ramifies to related industries and the public in general. Trouble that ties up railroads, for instance, is felt in some measure by manufacturers and their employees, by express companies and their employees, by producers of raw material, shippers, and the traveling public. An interruption of industry has an unsettling influence to the remotest corner of business.

Nearly every struggle has its list of injured and dead; and the loss of life is both a human and economic loss. Sometimes the workers suffer most, sometimes the employers, and sometimes the indirectly interested public. Regardless of the proportions, for that is not our point here, each of the three parties have had a share in the suffering and in its infliction; and each can testify to its seriousness, and to its cost.

On the other hand, the absence of open trouble is not always an indication that industrial conditions are helpful, healthful or profitable to those concerned, whether worker or employer. Peace, if it may be so called, which continues when workers think, whether rightly or wrongly, that they have a grievance sufficiently serious, for instance, to justify destroying property and killing innocent people—peace of that kind is too expensive. It exploits the future for the sake of the present by allowing the embers of dissatisfaction, whether justly or unjustly kindled, to come, unobserved, perhaps, to a flaming point. It is both parsimony and false economy to put off the evil day, while the causes of dissatisfaction may yet be determined and remedied, by depending for the settlement of industrial disputes upon the present chaotic public agencies. The record of these agencies, to date, shows little more than a speeding of the stronger side—which has sometimes been the employers and sometimes the strikers—in wearing out its weaker opponent. They have thus reduced the period of idleness in some cases, but the result in reality is a mere temporary cessation of the struggle, not settlement upon a basis involving mutual understanding and a satisfactory facing of the issues.

Broad-gauge Scrutiny Needed

Those who recognize the seriousness of these industrial disturbances will be quick to see the

need of dealing with them in some large-scale systematic way, instead of letting the present chaos of public agencies continue. We are escaping from the mystical notion that somehow things will work themselves out, and are beginning to see the importance of scientific study of knotty problems, whether they deal with commerce, business organization, community life, public health, or the relations of employer and worker. The modern method is first to gather the facts of a given problem, to analyze them, and to locate causes before beginning to prescribe remedies. To whatever extent this method has been substituted for the old haphazard guesswork treatment of diseases, for instance, to that extent have health disturbances been reduced. The scientific business man first surveys his field and analyzes its future needs before prescribing to meet them. Why not catch step, then, with the approved methods of the times and follow the way they suggest in dealing with this tremendously vital question of equity between the interests of capital, of labor, and of the public? The time has come to look at things as they are. For a people who wish to get at the root of things the day of make-shifts in this field has passed. Those who read deep in the trend of the times see the snapping point, through the increasing tension of industrial conditions, too near at hand for delay. An intelligent interest in the future not only of the working people, not only of employers, but of the country itself, demands an impartial scrutiny of causes and tendencies. That, in a nutshell, is what is sought through the proposed Federal Commission on Industrial Relations.

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